

THE DANCE

INDIA



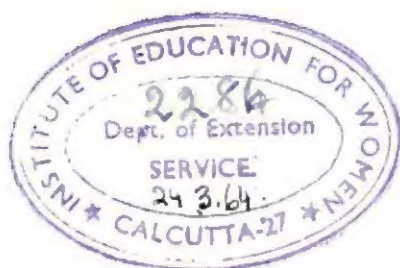
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A group of Banjara dancers from Hyderabad

THE DANCE IN INDIA

THE dance in India can be classified into three groups, the Tribal, the Folk and the Classical. The tribal dance is the visible rhythmic formulation or expression of the joys and beliefs of a people once referred to as 'aborigines', but now looked upon as *Adivasis* or 'original inhabitants'. For these simple unsophisticated people, living mostly in scattered forest areas, life continues to be something of a ritual and dance an integral part of it. Almost akin to these dances but less ritualistic in content are the folk dances, which are as varied and as reflective of the day-to-day activities of the mass of the people as their primitive precedents. Having evolved from these humble sources, but crystallized and transmuted into stylized interpretations of divine activities are the classical dance-forms which are practised exclusively by the votary.

This kaleidoscope of dances represents a fascinating facet of the culture that had once contributed to the 'glory that was Ind'.

In Africa, it is said, the tribes and their beliefs are recognized through the beat of the drum and the rhythm of the dance. This is largely true of the tribes in India as well. For them dance is more than an expression of physical or emotional exuberance, something more than a form of entertainment. They dance their religion. On the accurate and proper performance of the dance depend their success in chase and victory in war, fertility in woman and yield from the land, pacification of the elements and elimination of pestilence, protection from evil and fruition of love. Dance is the 'creator, preserver, steward and guardian'. Whatever be the form of the dance, it is not so much a vehicle of entertainment as a ritual wherein the dancer and the spectator participate.

This functional aspect of dance is, however, undergoing a gradual change under the stress of civilizing processes. It may be that the Buffalo dance of the Gonds of Orissa is no longer the mimetic magic that it once was. When the Maria moves in amazing group precision and the Gond in graceful sinuous lines, the verve and abandon remains, even though the faith in its potency is gone and the dance continues to be beautiful.

The religious element is fast receding into the background in the case of the folk dances as well, barring those which form part of



**The Dancing Goddess,
Belur Temple, Mysore**

the festivals. The dance, nevertheless, remains a wonderful medium for the expression of the simple joys of the people and as an accompaniment to many of their activities. They abandon themselves to the spontaneity of dance, whether they meet to celebrate a marriage or a birth, to welcome the spring or the first refreshing showers, or whether they gather at the end of a hunt or harvest, or meet to celebrate their colourful festivals.

The simple folk of the Himalayan region, draped in home-spun and decorated in silver, move with sedate dignity as they perform the Shapdoh or the Pamgi to the lilt of their strange music. The lovely maids from Manipur, in their earthy shades of brown and maroon, dance with exquisite grace and lightness as they welcome the spring to the beat of the Khol and the song provided by the chorus. The Rajasthan warrior whirls in wild splendour as the exciting rhythm of the great big

drums rends the air, and the men and women from the Punjab add a delightful touch of sensuousness to the art which is both pleasing and merry. The slender women from the South wind and unwind the gaily coloured ropes as they sing and dance their Pinnal Kolattam, the beautifully arrayed women of Gujarat move round and round as they perform their 'Garba', unconscious of the fact that the dance they so blithely render is an ancient fertility rite.

The universality of the themes and the similarity in the steps and pattern in these dance-forms are striking. But the dances are never monotonous. The regional colouring in dress and ornaments, in song and instruments, particularly the drums which differ from place to place,

makes them rich and varied. No matter what the form and manner of their performance, the folk dances, like the primitive dances, continue to be a powerful socialising medium for bringing the people together. To see them all in their own *mise en scene*, would mean endless travelling.

With the new awakening, the folk dances of India are coming into their own. They now form a colourful and spectacular feature of Republic Day pageantry and this is a measure of their recognition as an integral part of the variegated culture of India.

Rooted in these folk dances, yet evolved and developed into highly sophisticated hieratic art-forms are the classical dances. Canonic prescription has laid down the law governing every detail of their science and technique, including their ultimate objective. These laws are embodied in ancient treatises, the outstanding standard work in the field being Bharata's *Natya Shastra* and Nandikeshwara's *Abhinaya Darpana*. They are said to be the culled essence of the Four Vedas. The authors claim divine revelation, attributing the origin of the dance to Siva, Nataraja, the Lord of Dance, who sent pulsing life through inert matter through the rhythm of his Cosmic Dance.

The *Natya Shastra* is a monumental treatise on the art of drama-turgy as a whole, of which music and dance are indispensable concomitants. The law governing the intricate technique of classical dance is also formulated within its encyclopaedic range. The *Abhinaya Darpana* or the *Mirror of Gestures*, as its name indicates, deals particularly with the technique of dance, with stylized movements and gestures, both decorative and interpretative, that involve every part of the body—the head, the limbs, the torso, etc.

According to these treatises, dance is divided into two main divisions, *Nritta* and *Nritya*. *Nritta* is intricate abstract dance consisting of stylized movements and poses, which are devoid of dramatic content. *Nritya* is suggestive, interpretative dance with every movement and gesture invested with



Siva's triumphant dance as 'Gajasur',
Halebid, Mysore State

meaning. Further, *Tandava* is the more dynamic, forceful, masculine aspect, and *Lasya* its more delicate, graceful feminine counterpart.

The gesture code called *Abhinaya* is a medium of expression, meaning to "take towards" (from *Abhi*-take, *Naya*-towards) or present a theme to the audience. The *Abhinaya* consists of four limbs; the *Angika Abhinaya* or the gestures, movements and poses of the different parts of the body; the *Vachika Abhinaya* or the uttered word, speech or song; the *Aharya Abhinaya* or the external aids, such as costumes and make-up; the *Satvika Abhinaya* or the physical or outward manifestations of the psychic state of mind.

In the gesture language of the fingers generally referred to as *Mudras*, *Abhinaya* possesses a medium of expression as eloquent as the spoken word. Analysed, they seem to spring from four sources: *Mudras* or the finger movements involved in the performance of a religious rite; mimetic or imitative gestures symbolising an act, attribute, object or person; gestures in everyday use stylized and made more decorative for the dance; and gestures that seem to have been deliberately invented and invested with different interpretations. They consist of *Samyuta Hastas* or gestures that have to be done by both the hands together and *Asamvuta Hastas* or those that can be rendered by each hand individually. This symbolic vehicle enables the dancer to interpret and suggest anything from the least significant of created things to the Supreme Creator of them all.

This articulate medium, combined with the *Satvika Abhinaya* which helps reveal the inner condition of the mind, is indispensable for the manifestation of the basic mood, the abiding background of a given theme. The expression of the mood which is technically referred to as *Bhava* or the *main motif* evokes *Rasa*, sentiment or flavour that leads to complete aesthetic experience. In other words, the dancer should so perform that "where the hand is, there the eyes are, where the eyes are, there the mind is, where the mind is, there is *Bhava*, and where there is *Bhava*, there is *Rasa*." According to the theory of aesthetics, the expression of *Bhava* and the evocation and the consequent experience of *Rasa* are the true function and purpose of all art.

Basic Concept

All these components of dance would be just so much mime but for the fundamental coordinating *Laya* or rhythm which transforms them into dance. *Tala*, a cyclic system of intricate metrical time-measure peculiar to this country, transforms dance into a mathematical abstraction, and *Laya* or rhythm in all its complexities is but the manifestation of the primal rhythmic energy. Together they are the greatest factors of discipline to help the dancer in his attempt to attune himself to the cosmic content of the Universe. This, in brief, is the basic concept of classical dance in India, as expounded in the treatises. Authorised by canon, sanctified by tradition and stabilized by usage, these laws are as operative today as they were when first formulated over three thousand years ago.

Similar laws govern even the person of the dancer, the accompanying musicians and the members of the audience. The dancer is expected to be young, beautiful, light of step and physically well-proportioned. The dancer's musical and other artistic attainments, specially dexterity in the handling of rhythm, are defined. The musicians should include the singer, the cymbalist, the flute-player, the drummer and the *veena*-player. Their place on the stage and the ritual of the stage are also described. The audience, "the seven limbs of learning", is not without its governing laws, which specify that each person should sit in accordance with his cultural attainments. It is also stated that classical music and dance are not to be performed before an audience ignorant of these arts. The spectators are expected to be not only appreciative connoisseurs but also critical judges, who can combine intellectual comprehension with aesthetic delight. The classical dance is not meant for their entertainment but for their critical appreciation. In this delight born of true understanding, the artist and the aesthete meet, and the purpose of the art is fulfilled.

Such are the laws of dance. All the dances that conform to these canonic standards can not only be considered classical but also be included in the generic and comprehensive term, *Bharata Natya*. A name with such an encyclopaedic range cannot be monopolised by any one school of dance in particular, even if it has maintained the purity of its technique. *Bharata Natya*, which is the science of dramaturgy, is applicable to all the classical schools.

Schools of Classical Dance

The best known and generally accepted schools of classical dance in India are the *Kathakali* (Katha=story, Kali=play) of Kerala, the *Dasi-attam* (Dasi=slave, Attam=dance) or the Bharata Natyam of Madras, and the *Kathak* (the dance of the Kattika=the storyteller) of the North. Even though not quite a classical dance in its strict connotation, the *Manipuri* dance of the people of Manipur (Mani=jewel, pur=city) is considered as such. But this list is far from being exhaustive. There are the *Kuchipudi* of Andhra, the *Bhagawata Mela Nataka* of Tanjore, the *Yaksha Gana* of Karnatak. Like the *Kathakali* of Kerala, these are dance-dramas exclusively acted by men alone who are called Bhagawatars. Brahmins by birth, the Bhagawatars are well trained in dance and pantomime as embodied in the *Natya Shastra*. It is even said that to complete a course in pure dance, a dancer is expected to go to a Bhagawatar for a final training in facial expression. The importance of these schools, particularly the *Kuchipudi* and the *Bhagawata Mela Nataka*, is now being realized and ere long they may hold their own against the other dances of the country.

Kathakali

The technique of *Kathakali*, the dance-drama par excellence of Kerala, is vestigial of India's ancient tradition when dramas were acted



Kathakali combines dance and drama in a high degree

and sung. It is neither just pantomime nor dance alone, but a vivid and virile combination of *Natya* (drama), *Nritta* (abstract dance) and *Nritya* (interpretative dance) in a dynamic whole. Exclusively performed by men, its accent is on the *Tandava*, the more forceful aspect of dance. Convention demands that the feminine roles be portrayed by men, and it surpasses all imagination how these athletic young men can transform themselves into charming coquettish damsels, so wonderful is the element of mime and *abhinaya* in Kathakali. In *Mohiniattam*, the dance of the enchantress, however, the women of Kerala have their exquisite and subtle medium, which is even now being revived from the slightly unsavoury form it had assumed during the days when India's culture suffered an eclipse during her period of political servitude.

The initiation of the Kathakali technique at an early age in the *Kalari* or gymnasium, when the difficult technique of the dance is slowly but surely kneaded into the very system of the young aspirants by a process of massage, exercise and technical training for over a period of five to seven years. The result is the extraordinary elasticity of the body capable of performing the *Tandava*, symbolising energy and dynamism. It also means complete manipulation of the eyes and control of every muscle of the face, which, combined with the flexibility of the fingers, endows the dancer with a vocabulary which leaves nothing to be desired.



Kathakali dancers



Nakula, one of the Pandava brothers: he wears the same dress as Bhima, except that he paints his face yellow and wears a long headgear or crown.

"The eyeballs unroll evanescent miracles; the dark eyebrows utter hidden secrets of the heart; contending feelings speak with a brace of tongue in each eye and even the same eye delivers opposite moods at the same time. The face becomes the open drama in which the story is drawn in successive shades and touches of lineament and then there is the dance."

The *Kathakali* which is in vogue today is attributed to the genius of a ruler who evolved the new technique out of an older form, namely, *Krishnattam*, some time between the end and the beginning of the 16th and 17th centuries. Though modern, its foundation rooted in a distant past is all too evident. The elaborate costume, the strange masklike make-up, the gorgeous crowns are all reminiscent of its folk traditions. The costume consisting of multi-pleated billowing white skirts, the long-sleeved tunics with red ornamented breast-plates, the yards and yards of cloth garlands ending up in resettes continue to challenge the research student.

The art of make-up is a hereditary vocation and experts spend hours on each face, firstly, with solid foundation forming new contours of the face and, secondly, with the application of different colours. The varying shades and the knots and spikes reflect the basic character of the person portrayed. Red, green, black, amber and white dominate. The green and the amber signify the *Satvik* or the purer nobler types, red the *Rajasik* or the passionate characters, and black with little spikes and protuberations on nose and forehead represent the *Tamasik* or the dark depraved beings. Long nails and fierce tusks add further to their ferocity. The mouth and the eyes are outlined and accentuated with thick red or white lines. The eyes are reddened by the placing of eggplant seeds under the lids. The total effect adds to the strange but dramatic beauty of the face. The heavy and complicated make-up reminiscent of masks of old seems but to enhance the changing expression of the face.



A Kathakali dancer as Lord Rama



Rukmini Devi

The grace, poise and beauty of symmetrical patterns of movement which distinguish Bharata Natyam invest it with almost universal appeal. Here are some of the leading exponents of the dance



Ram Gopal



Indrani Rehman



Nataraja and Shakuntala

Shanta Rao



Towering over the extraordinary faces are the magnificent crowns, all glitter and gold. Equally ancient in origin, their present form and shape, however, conform to the rules of Hindu iconography.

In the stillness of the evening when the vibrating rhythm of the *Chenda* (the drum) beats out its incessant call, the villagers begin to gather and settle themselves on mats before the raised mud platform. The dance-drama begins with a propitiatory prelude enacted behind a unique "drop" curtain held by two men. Interest, drama and suspense are heightened as the audience catches fleeting, tantalizing glimpses of a superb crown, a serene face, long claws, or tusked faces uttering weird shrieks. The curtain is withdrawn; the singer unfolds the story; the percussion instruments, the *Chenda* and the *Maddalom*, drum out the exciting complicated rhythms. The dance begins, sometimes to last the night through, sometimes to continue for two or more days. The audience watches with appreciative interest as the familiar beloved stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are enacted. The burning wicks flicker; the shadows cast by the flame join in the dance; and the smoke gently rising from the flames increases the magic spell. Kathakali almost ceases to be a dance-drama, and an ancient ritual takes its place.

Bharata Natyam

The South Indian dance, originally called *Dasiattam*, has, within the last decade or so, acquired the name of *Bharata Natyam*, thereby taking to itself a broad-based generic term which really belongs to all the schools that adhere to its classical traditions. This implies the denial of the older classical Dravidian tradition of the South in which *Dasiattam* is inextricably rooted. It is possible that the treatise, Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, itself owes much to the South and is not altogether uninfluenced by the same Dravidian culture.

In its present form, however, the dance known as *Bharata Natyam* is more truly *Dasiattam*, or the dance of the Devadasis, the dedicated servants of God. The repositories of the knowledge of the art are the *Nattuvamars*, the great hereditary dance teachers, but the actual performers have, for centuries, been the *Devadasis*. They have thereby left a permanent imprint of their perso-



A Bharata Natyam pose—Nataraja Temple, Chidambaram



The inimitable Balasaraswati from Madras in two 'abhinaya' poses





A dancer in the
cosmic pose of
Lord Siva

nality on the outward presentation of the dance. True to their calling, they specialized in *Nritya*, the more interpretative aspect of the dance, rather than in *Nritya*, its generally more dynamic and energetic aspect. This has given rise to the belief that this technique is exclusively meant for women, as Kathakali is for men.

Kathak

The Kathak Nach (dance), on the other hand, can be performed by men as well as women. The *Kathika*, the storyteller, who mimed, danced and sang his stories from the Epic days of India's history, continues to be the teacher as well as the performer. And in the courtesan, the frankly temporal edition of the supposedly spiritual *Devadasi*, he has an apt pupil and often a dangerous rival. During recent years, the *Kathika's* dance became colloquialized into the Kathak dance of today.

Adhering to the fundamentals of the technique, both the schools follow a similar pattern, combining *Nritya* and *Nritya*. They commence with an invocatory prelude, which, from being an obeisance to the gods above, had at one time almost degenerated into a salutation to the lords below, and the dance proper begins with a delightful overture of *Nritya*. Beginning in a slow tempo and involving a lot of exquisite

eye, eyebrow, neck and wrist movements, these opening pieces become attractive media for the subtle presentation of the dancers to the onlookers. It is just a prelude to the more intricate dancing that follows, consisting of beautiful arabesques of body patterns and delightfully decorative head movements in varying and contrapuntal rhythms.

At this point, the pattern of the dance followed by the two schools diverges, the *Devadasi*, the temple devotee, switches on to *Nritya* or interpretative dance through *Abhinaya*. With suggestive movements, articulate fingers and statuesque poses, she gives visible form and shape to the ecstatic outpourings of the singer. The singer in a Bharata Natyam item or number is a very important personage. He in reality sets the pattern of the dance, for, the dancer interprets what he sings, and without him her *Nritya* will not be possible. To the extent to which she is dependent on the singer, dance in the South may be said to be subservient to music. The themes of the song vary, and so do their technical compositions. It may be a psalm of prayer, a pran of praise or propitiation. The singer sings it, the cymbalist keeps time, the drummer beats out the rhythm on the *mrīdangam* (elongated drums), the flute echoes the melody and the *Veena* throbs gently. Song, music and dance unite as the dancer translates the songs and gives them exquisite tangible form, at once symbolic and explicit. Her *Abhinaya* makes poetry visible to the audience and keeps it enthralled. She ends her recital in a crescendo of brilliant dynamic *Nrītta*, but the accent is on *Nritya*.

The Kathika, on the other hand, true to the traditions of this school, continues this abstract *Nrītta* in more and more complicated time measures, ending up in an equally brilliant finale of decorative movements, tantalizing arrested pauses and lightning footwork. Little vignettes of *Nritya* intersperse the flow of *Nrītta*. At one time, it is a delicious episode from the life of a god, at another, it is a devotee laying her heart at the feet of the deity—the cry of the beloved for the lover. But the emphasis on *Nrītta* continues. The exciting drums, the *tabla* and the *pakhwaj*, provide the intricate rhythms; the dancer's feet take up the challenge and are transformed into percussion instruments, and the *sarangi* (stringed instrument) wails out the basic unchanging tune. Music, to the Kathika, is not an accompaniment, as it is to his confrere in the South. He is not completely dependent on the singer, and quite often he sings his own songs and interprets them. The melody of the *sarangi* and that of the flute provide the constant, absolute background against which the dancer and the drummer work out the rhythmic patterns in mathematical abstractions. Excitement transports the audience and the dancer is hypnotised by his own rhythmic variations. This is not just an exhibition of virtuosity. It is more; it is significant of the discipline acquired, both mental and physical, to help the dancer seek his oneness with the universal rhythm.

Where, therefore, with *Nritya* predominating, Bharata Natyam or Dasiattam is emotionally appealing, the Kathak Nach with its accent



"Chakkars" or rapid spins are a striking feature of Kathak

on *Nritya* remains coldly intellectual. Where the Dasi dazzles with the multiplicity of movements and the brilliance of symmetrical patterns and poses, the Kathak puzzles by the intricacies of his metrical measures and attracts by the sheer delicacy and utter subtlety of his movements. Actually, the two techniques, one specialising in *Nritya* and the other in *Nritya*, are complementary to each other.

The chequered history of North India unlike the unbroken repose of the South, which remained comparatively sheltered, is primarily responsible for the differing emphasis on the various aspects of the dance. In the South, where the magnificent temples flourished, the *Dasis* became the chief exponents of the art and danced before the idols in the inner sanctum, or led the procession when the gods were taken in circumambulation. While sons of the Muslim rulers in the North were excellent patrons and connoisseurs of Hindu art, a proselytising majority helped suppress the religious aspect of the art. From a temple art, dance became a court art. Rather than displease the patron with Hindu religious themes in a symbolic dance vocabulary which he could not appreciate or understand, the performer specialised in intricate variations of rhythm and movement, with the result that the gesture code declined and utterly delicate movements took its place. The *Nritya* became fragmentary. The stress was laid wholly on *Nritya*, on the halts and pauses that made rhythm tantalising and on the whirls and halts

that made the dance exciting. Where religious themes persisted, irrepressed by foreign zeal, the subtly esoteric took on the form of the sensuously erotic, its significance being apparent only to the initiated few.

Influence of Kathak

This transformation of the Kathak dance is not, as is commonly believed, due to the imposition of Muslim influence on a Hindu art. With a religion inimical to music and dance, the Muslims came with no heritage of these arts to be able to influence indigenous techniques believed to have originated with the Hindu gods. For that matter, there are practically no dancers of any consequence amongst the Muslims, and certainly no hereditary dance teachers. Contrarily, as India expanded culturally, classical dances found fresh florescence elsewhere. The vibrant dances of the South re-lived in the delicate fluttering movements of Bali and in the statuesque poses of Siam. The reverberations of the Kathak rhythms *per se* still echo in the drum-beats of the Middle East. The clusters of rhythms showered by Spanish castanets and provocative moves and quick turns of the Flamenco dancers are not too far removed from their Kathak predecessor.

Muslim influence, if any, is best seen in the costumes of the dancers. The *Kathika* in Jaipur affected the tight pyjamas, the flowing long coats and the turban, while his colleague in Lucknow went gay with bright colours and resplendent brocades. He preferred baggy trousers yards in width, rich coats, embroidered caps and sashes that went across the waist and above the shoulder. The women replaced the knotted draperies seen in the cave temples of Ajanta and Bagh, with tight-fitting pyjamas and long, open, loose gossamer tunics. Even the typical Hindu multipleated skirt, the sheathed *choli* (blouse) and the alluring *Odham* could not escape the Muslim influence in the contour-revealing pyjamas. There is yet another—not a dance costume so much as an aberration of one—which makes a good practice costume, consisting of pyjamas and tunic with a cap set at a saucy angle. Anything more inappropriate for a dancer cannot be conceived of.

The *Devadasi's* dream is the typical South Indian *sari*, bright-coloured and rich. One end of it is wound round the lower limbs individually so as to allow perfect freedom of movement. The other end, the gorgeous decorative *Pallaumis*, is taken over the left shoulder and brought down on the right side to form a sash and to hang in magnificent folds in front. True to canonic dictates, the women dancers both in the North and the South are beautifully dressed, richly jewelled and artistically made up. The lovely jewels are regional in design. They decorate the hair, hang from the ears, lie snug around the neck, jingle at the wrist, and accentuate the slim waist-line. The *Dasi* bedecks herself with flowers, which her sister in the North avoids. Collyrium for the eyes and henna decorations for hand and feet enhance their beauty. Tinkling bells on the ankles made of either



Lai Haroba dance of Manipur

silver, brass or preferably bronze complete the decorative ensemble of the dancer.

Even more fascinatingly attired are the lovely brown-skinned, slant-eyed maidens of Manipur. They wear two or three different types of costumes, some in soft earthy shades and some star-spangled and gorgeous ; some are of indigenous origin resembling the *lungi* of the Far East, and the others seem to be of Indian origin but transformed by local colouring.

Cradled in the spurs of the Himalayas as they dip into Assam, Manipur (Mani=jewel, Pur=city), even though a part of India, has remained aloof for a variety of reasons. She has, therefore, fostered her own indigenous folk dances in a technique peculiar to herself. Out of these have evolved her classical, dramatic dances like the *Lai Haroba*, a strange mixture of ritual and dance, of Manipuri folklore and Hindu mythology. This is a religious dance-drama in which specially trained dancers and the village folk in general, children included, participate, the former leading and the latter following. Like the Kathakali, this dance-drama is spread over a period of days and is divided into many sections. The costumes consist of the *lungi* and tight-fitting jackets with pleated

sashes. Turbans for men are conspicuous, usually made of yards and yards of thin white material.

The classical element in its strict sense, however, is best seen in dances which have infiltrated from the mainland. With the introduction of Hinduism, with particular stress on its devotional aspect, Manipur became Hinduised as late as the 18th century. With religion, she adopted the religious songs, the *Kirtans*, and the religious dances, like the *Rasa Lila*, which is danced practically in all parts of the country. This extraordinary *Mandala Nritya* or circular dance symbolising the union of the individual souls with the Supreme Soul, interpreted in terms of divine love of Lord Krishna for the milk-maids of Brindaban, particularly Radha, has become a part of Manipur's culture as well. It is enacted during the appropriate seasons of the year, the principal parts being taken by well-trained professional dancers. Compared with the classical dances of India, the technique employed is less rigid but the dance is sweetly lyrical. The face remains serenely immobile, but the movements of the body and the sinuous flow of arms and limbs is eloquent. It is predominantly *Nritya*, but without too much emphasis on the gesture language. The meaning is conveyed not through any exacting code, but through the movements of the gently swaying body, and the exquisite

Manipuri dancers in a characteristic pose



grace of the arms. More than a dance-drama, the *Rasa Lila* in Manipur is an operatic dance with the dancers often participating in the song. The accompanying music and the chorus are typical of the place, but instruments like cymbals, conch, flute and drums are ubiquitous. The costume for this particular dance appears to be an adaptation of the Rajasthani, multipleated skirt, jacket and veil. The Manipuri skirt, however, is bereft of the pleats but hangs stiff and straight. It is gorgeously embroidered with mica glasses which gleam and sparkle with every movement of the dancer. Over this there is another, a much shorter, stiffer, thinner skirt which, with the help of stays, stands out like a ballet dancer's tutu. A dark-coloured tight-fitting jacket accentuates the slim waistline, and over them all is the lovely gossamer star-studded veil, draped from a decorative coiffure, adding allurements and glamour to the delicate dancers, as they dance in the temple and in the specially decorated arenas. For sheer beauty and lyrical grace, the Manipuri *sarees* are restfully delightful, and add to the heritage of Indian classical dances.

Influence of New Factors

The story of the different schools of dance in India will not be complete without a reference to the numerous factors that make them so varied and colourful. More than geographical and historical exigencies, it is the environmental and ethnological factors that inject new life and vigour into each of them, which even standardized classical dances cannot quite escape. The inherent characteristics of a race leave their permanent impress on the art of a people. The South Indian group is different from the North Indian, and the Manipuri distinct from either of them. Gestures and poses, gait and gaze, even though executed to a prescribed pattern, bear the imprint of racial, regional and even religious differences. Regional costume and jewellery add to the variety; regional languages, to no less extent, add to the diversity. More than everything else, some of the truly great hereditary teachers, artistic geniuses bequeathing their knowledge in pupillary succession, leave the impress of their personality on their art.

The present form of Bharata Natyam (*Dasattam*), it is said, is the composition of four great brothers, Chinniah, Ponnai, Vadivelu and Sivanandam, who in turn were preceded by another quartet of equally great brothers. The Kathak of the north was drawn forth from its decadent stage and given new life and vigour by the two brothers of Lucknow, Bindadin Maharaj and Kalika Prasad, about whom colourful legends abound. In the Hindu stronghold of Rajasthan, where this dance was preserved even better, its present form owes a great deal to one of the distinguished dancers from Jaipur, Pandit Jailalji. The rivalry between two rulers, the Zamorin of Calicut and the Raja of Kotarkara, perhaps purely political, nevertheless led to the glorious florescence of Kathakali. The little-known classical, dramatic dance called

Bhagavata Mela Nataka has been rejuvenated by Venkatarama Shastriar, the dramatist, and Natesha Iyer, the dancer. All these great artists flourished in the last two or three centuries; none of them has changed the basic foundations but all of them have added to the towering super-structure of Indian dance.

Revivalist Movement

The impact of an age is even more apparent in the dance-forms of today. The last two or three decades, which may be called the revivalist period in our dance history, have seen a number of new dancers appear in the firmament. They did not belong to the class of hereditary teachers, nor to the families of *Devadasis* and courtesans. These were pioneers, well educated by modern standards, whose one motivating desire was to revive this classic art-form from the oblivion into which unsympathetic conquerors had driven it, and to give it its rightful place in the galaxy of the fine arts.

It was a difficult period and the odds were heavy. Notwithstanding all these hurdles, some amongst the dancers remained purists, adhering to the classical tradition of the art. The dance platforms of the country resounded to the rhythms of Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Kathakali and Manipuri. There was finesse but not professional mastery. Those who had assimilated the art of other cultures, however, incorporated new features into old forms, employing the sophisticated stagecraft of the West in the presentation of the ancient techniques. Handled by masters, this novel experiment met with remarkable success and popularity in choreography, decor and projection, but in the hands of aspiring amateurs similar experiments have led to dismal consequences.

After Independence, which gave a great impetus to the resuscitation of all arts, there has been a tremendous output of dancers almost on a mass scale. They range from the strictest classicist to the neophyte and sometimes even to the amateur.

Young enthusiasts have banded themselves into theatre guilds and ballet groups and have undertaken the task of modernizing dance. Some of them are even giving up the old themes and adopting new ones that reflect current political, economic and social situations. These are ambitious projects and occasionally a production has revealed both artistry and originality. But often the dramatic content is superior to the dance because of the lack of technical equipment of the dancers, a drawback which is covered up by extremely attractive decor and costume. The overwhelming desire to present all types of dances together detracts from the value of the purer forms. The ambition to learn all the different techniques without the necessary discipline and perseverance to master even one, results in a hybridization, claimed as "modern", "creative" or "inspired".

When the over-enthusiasm of this transitional period decreases; when dance ceases to be a fashionable subject; when the educational

institutions deem it fit to combine the liberal and fine arts in the curriculum; when Government-sponsored institutes and "Akadamies" learn to disseminate knowledge of the fundamentals of Indian art; when the movies cease to sabotage the efforts of the scholar and the artist; when, in short, the effervescent defects of the age cease to be, when the period of transition, with its errors and inadequacies, passes, it may be hoped that Bharata's dance sustained by the laws of its science will come into its own and flourish—alive, dynamic and truly reflective of its inherent vitality.

Expression of Artistic Urge

In the final analysis, the dances of India are at once the magnificent expression of her artistic urges as well as the outward formalization of her religion and philosophy. The majestic Hindu Pantheon, with all its array of gods and goddesses symbolizing the "Supreme Being" in all His varied manifestations, will remain the perennial fount of its inspiration. The colourful stories from the Epics, the *Puranas* and the *Bhagwata*, of the gods and the dazzling heroes will continue to inspire the artist for all time to come.

The poet's ecstatic outpouring and the dancer's rhythmic exultation are but the art-forms of religion; in fact, religion itself. Hinduism is a way of life, of righteous living, in which the dance is lifted from the level of mere self-expression and transformed into a vehicle of ultimate self-realization. To the true devotee, dance is a form of *Yoga*, a process of disciplined self-elimination towards that final identification with the "Eternal Becoming", which is the Cosmic Dance of the Lord of Dance—Nataraja or Siva.





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